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Voucher foes want state to reject pilot program

Perry, many lawmakers favor limited trial of school-choice initiative

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AUSTIN — Opponents of tax-funded private school vouchers called on state lawmakers Wednesday to reject the idea this year, contending that it would rob public schools of millions of badly needed dollars.

Working with the Texas Freedom Network, a group of about 200 parents and teachers from the

LEGISLATURE

Edgewood school district in San Antonio spread out across the Capitol to lobby against legislation that would create a pilot voucher program in the state.

Two bills filed in the House would launch the pilot voucher program in the six largest school districts in Texas — Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin, Houston, Cypress-Fairbanks and San Antonio's Northside.

Among those who spoke at a rally in the statehouse was Edgewood Superintendent Luis Gonzales,

whose district has lost about 1,600 students to a privately financed voucher program in San Antonio, the CEO Horizon Scholarship Program. It is one of the largest programs of its kind in the nation.

Dr. Gonzalez said those students represent about \$4 million in state aid that would have gone to Edgewood schools. Much bigger losses would occur with a state voucher program, he said.

"When we can't equitably and adequately fund public schools, how can we start funding private

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Voucher opponents say schools can't afford to give up revenue

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schools?" he asked. "How can we send money from our state coffers to private schools that are not held to state accountability standards?"

A House member from San Antonio, Democrat Jose Menendez, went a step further, saying that House opponents of school vouchers "will die on this issue" and are prepared to do whatever it takes to defeat the legislation.

"Now is not the time to play politics and make reckless decisions regarding our public schools," he said.

In his State of the State address last week, Gov. Rick Perry called for creation of a limited voucher program for students — a position shared by many Republicans and some Democrats in the Legislature.

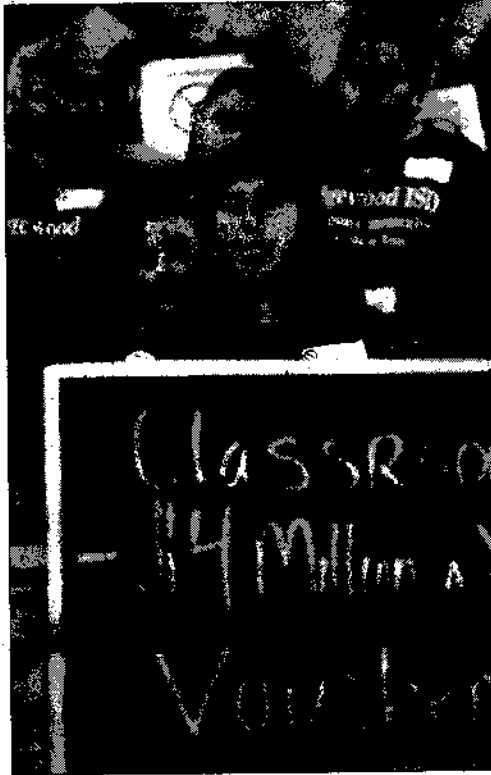
"Let's allow parents of children stuck in substandard schools to choose the best school for their child — whether that school is public, private or religious," Mr. Perry said. "When you give parents a choice, you give children a chance."

Reacting to Wednesday's anti-voucher lobbying effort, the Texas Public Policy Foundation said voucher critics have exaggerated the impact that such a program would have on public schools.

"It's unfortunate that the Texas Freedom Network seeks to deny academic choice and freedom to the parents of Texas school children," said Brooke Leslie Rollins, president of the foundation, which has sparred frequently with the network on education issues.

"In reality, experience shows that most parents are happy with the education provided to most children in public schools."

The foundation was started by



HARRY CABLUCK/Associated Press

Ritabel Garza of San Antonio sent her two sons to private schools, then returned them to public schools after two months. She was among voucher opponents who spoke at an anti-voucher news conference Wednesday in Austin.

San Antonio millionaire James Leininger, who also launched the CEO Horizon Scholarship Program, which pays tuition for Edgewood students who wish to attend a private or religious school in the area. That privately funded voucher program began in the fall of 1998.

Several previous attempts over the last decade to pass a pilot voucher program in the Legislature have failed as teachers' groups, school boards and the Texas PTA united to fight the idea.

Supporters are more confident this year because Republicans have majorities in both houses for the first time in over a century.

Ironically, the only voucher bills filed so far this year were au-

thored by a Democrat, Rep. Ron Wilson of Houston, a longtime advocate of vouchers.

"I think the most important issue facing us in the Legislature is the sad, sorry, despicable, deplorable, horrible, monstrous state of affairs of our public schools," Mr. Wilson said at a recent legislative conference sponsored by the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

His bill would offer vouchers to students who either fail the state's basic skills exam or are enrolled in a low-performing school in any of the six urban districts. Those vouchers could be used to attend any private or public school that will accept them.

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